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ABSTRACT

The learner centered approach to university teaching could be a powerful and meaningful approach to course offerings, although never the only possible approach to college teaching. However, learner centered instruction is powerful and could alter retention rates, increase attendance, and change some discontent with present practices. Moving beyond lecture to learner centered instruction is difficult and requires hard work and strength on the part of the professor. Community building is required, especially in this era of ready information in which students can find so much from the Internet, and professors recognize that disseminating information is not the critical mission of higher education. The challenge of teaching is not in building a knowledge base, but in building people as practitioners of life and society. (Contains 40 references.) (SLD)

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Learner Centered courses in the university: A powerful and meaningful addition

Introduction

The learner centered approach to university teaching could be a powerful and meaningful addition to course offerings. One key to facilitating that change requires recognition that the gifts of academics are varied and idiosyncratic. Like a symphony, different voices, strengths, tones, rhythms, add to the integrity of the composition. At the university, some professors are dynamite as researchers, as leaders, as teachers. By recognizing strengths and utilizing unique and individual gifts we could strengthen the brain trust we already have. The diversity, perspectives and brilliance, even laser focused giftedness of some professors, should not be lost in new art forms of teaching. Learner centered instruction is is not for everyone, and it should not have to be.

That said, learner centered instruction is powerful and it could alter retention rates, increase attendance, change some of the dramatic discontent. It is a simpler and more reasonable solution than security personnel, metal detectors, litigation, adopting new policies with "teeth" to empower us to suspend or expel disenchanted students. Socrates stands as the vanguard of this idea, seeing the student as recipient of teacher attention and questions, a dialogue, a revered relationship.

Were he present he might begin by asking us for whom education exists. The presumed answer is the student. It is less clear how our actions, practices as institutions, or testing and evaluation procedures support that response. Students are the object of the literature of teacher education but seldom the subjective, first person focus. There are notable exceptions. *Rousing Minds to Life* (Tharp & Gallimore, 1993) describes a program that enmeshes teacher and student roles in the elementary setting, and *Students Teaching, Teachers Learning* (Branscombe, Goswami & Schwartz, 1992) provides a model that extends the mutuality and blending of focus from elementary classrooms through graduate settings. At the doctoral level, the attention does switch to a student focus.

What we *say* so well

The action of teaching is traditionally aimed at student as recipient, closely attuned to the idea of filling the vessel. Sharing the actual active engagement of teaching with student is theoretically supported from Plato to Dewey (1938), Piaget (1952), Vygotsky (1978; 1987). It is honored by educational writers in the present. Sizer (1992), DeVries & Zan (1994), Gardner (1991) all argue the critical nature of the role of active and engaged student.

Schon's (1987) model of reflective scholar is widely heralded. Socratic dialogue is embraced by business education programs (Issacs, Sloan School of Management; Bohm & Edwards, 1991; Senge, 1992). It is occasionally used as a professional development model (Murphy, 1997) for teachers. The teacher education practitioner models (Goodlad, 1986) and professional development programs (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 1995; Holmes Group, 1990) philosophically embrace future teachers constructing meaning from personal experience, supporting the idea of student as actor.

We Recognize

Recent breakthroughs in brain research and educational exploration should impact our view of cognition and pedagogical practices (Zimmerman, 1990; Morris, 1991; Ames, 1992; Corno, 1992; Weiner, 1992; Maehr & Andermann, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Reeve, 1996; Bear, Connors,, & Paradiso, 2001). The findings underscore the importance of moving students into a more active and responsible role. The changes are labor intensive, still in process, still emerging. We are just learning what is required to permit or call students to individually construct meaning (Jadallah, 1996; Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996). Although there are pockets of change, the notion of sharing the responsibility for learning, sharing the role of teacher and educators assuming the role and dimensions of co-learner are not enveloping the field of education. The movement is creeping rather than sweeping forward. The Association of Teacher Educators sponsored a year long discussion about democracy in education in 1996-97. Few papers at the conventions described teacher education programs in the process of adopting shared teacher /learner roles. Most sessions were presented as lectures, modeling a converse methodology.

In theory

We recognize the importance of moving beyond lecture, but implementing the practices we extol is formidable. Why is this change so difficult? With insight stressing the importance of expanding the student role and a solid research base to show the efficacy, why hasn't the paradigm shifted more dramatically and rapidly? Looking at factors that impede progress may assist us in speeding implementation of new pedagogical intentions.

This seems especially pressing, as computer assisted and long distance learning programs continue to emerge, calling upon the student to be self directed. Analyzing and understanding student and teacher roles, the diversity and possibility in each and the points of overlap is critical. There is urgency in developing apriori insights into pedagogical practices. Not only must we think about thinking and reflect on teaching practices, we need support

in removing impediments. We need our own practical support, acquiring new skills in the art and practice of teaching and learning.

We must be about the study, recognition and reformulation of functional and ethical practices in education. A different student is arriving at the university. We can meet their needs and capitalize on teaching and learning opportunities. We need to address that learner more competently. In actively pursuing that goal, several issues emerged.

In practice

Any change presents unexpected difficulties, takes more time, energy, focus, and has a potential for failure that represents an unnecessary expenditure if the status quo is maintained. In addition, few resources provide time for change, so frequently we felt we were "building the plane while flying it". After a decade of implementation, we found these were the actual tasks. When we did these things, active teaching and learning, constructive education, learner centered experiences were successful:

- Asking students to be partners in our educational journey.
- Moving the fulcrum from teacher in charge to educators and students sharing responsibility for learning, teaching, and evaluating. . . and constantly hitting the "refresh" button to remind ourselves we were doing that.
- Teaching process and relationship skills in conjunction with fact based content.
- Individualizing instruction and assessment options to a much greater degree.
- Developing a community and cooperative rather than competitive environment, with assessment and evaluation mirroring rather than sabotaging that social environment.
- Sharing evaluation responsibilities with students.
- Recognizing, teaching, and modeling social responsibility skills, including self discipline, patience, self understanding and self acceptance.

It is important to underscore that there is no way to legislate the kind of change that is necessary to develop a new format for teaching / learning. This enhanced model is based on hard work, enough personal strength in the professor to remember he or she is the professional and holds the major responsibility to maintain equilibrium and the desire of teachers to further develop mechanisms that underscore a professional role or persona.

Individualization is an essential element in moving from teacher as main player to sharing responsibility and focus. We honor individualization but find it difficult to achieve. Balance becomes essential, and we found the need to "spot" each other frequently. Talking about events, debriefing, remembering the highlights, helped balance growth of the person as life long learner with knowledge based gains.

Power and control are critical elements that teachers use to maintain the learning environment. Sharing decision making, goal setting, lesson planning and evaluation is so often untried, and sounds infinitely more time consuming than the present model, if not just plain distasteful.

Structure becomes more fluid and more defined. Empowering students and offering opportunities to lead and engage in community requires training and understanding of legitimate roles and the responsibilities of leadership. As new roles are tried and new responsibilities assumed, a sense of safety in the environment is crucial.

New teaching roles are difficult to generate since there is little historic background or research to facilitate implementation. More than that, teaching is an art and a craft. Trying new roles means failing, feeling insecure, trusting those around us to be supportive and to risk, too. It means being uncomfortable repeatedly. The fulcrum shifts from teacher in charge to shared responsibility for teaching and learning. Trust in a shared internal sense of how learning takes place is critical, and it is questioned by teachers and students.

Recognizing, developing and then preparing students for new roles is time consuming and challenging. The developmental nature of this change, gaining process is more work for students, and some resent and resist the time and energy involved in such a partnership. The semester is already laden with cogent content and students are often resistant or hostile to unexpected demands on their time and energy. However, if we do not, the resistance can be daunting! The failure of students often turns to frustration and uncertainty that then becomes anger.

Teaching is an art for those who are master teachers. Great teaching is the result of modeled experiences, practice, fine tuning and self transcendence. Developing a new repertoire takes time, and is especially difficult if acceptance of new practices and methods is not assured. The lack of modeling also makes adopting and finding acceptance for the new patterns difficult. How did many of us learn to teach? By the modeling of others. This is missing when we try new roles.

Second person perspective is a critical element in moving from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side," and essential in the move to a shared learning/teaching environment. This is primarily a maturational task, based on

good mental health, personality characteristics and fully developed moral reasoning, yet this is neither the focus of screening for teacher programs nor addressed in teacher preparation.

Revolution is never truly solitary. Changes in classrooms include the purview of the general public, regents, certification boards and other university or college departments and community members. The ramifications are like ripples. Outcomes are often unforeseen and may be painful, or counter revolutionary, affecting accreditation, interface with elementary and secondary student teaching opportunities, job opportunities, etc. Peers often express anger and frustration when students move to other university situations and expect to use those skills in new arenas with professors who do not share the roles.

Mastery of content may include development of process skills as well as producing a specific knowledge base. Reflective practitioner represents an honorable outcome. Such a denouement is only possible if content is presented in conjunction with reflection followed by evaluation utilizing and valuing the reflective practice (Clift, Houston & Pugach, 1990). As an example, if a professor evaluates students solely with a multiple choice test, students inherently recognize reflection as a whim or point for discussion rather than a critical, highly valued necessity. Such modeling provides the content and context of the message.

Responsive evaluation tools need to be developed to provide evidence of learning beyond objective quantification, to ask for and measure process as well as outcome. Assessment of the roles needs to be included in the evaluation. Evaluation of student success in the world of work, retention, number going on to graduate school, all need to be followed. Current attrition in our program showed a loss of 5% or 1 out of 20 students. Professor loss was much higher.

Student as Evaluator is a critical component of blending new roles and teaching styles. Preparing students to self evaluate, to recognize and utilize the power of evaluation honorably is labor intensive. Gaining a knowledge base in a subject is often developmental or hierarchical with competent use of analysis and criticism coming as a result of depth of understanding.

Relationship skills are critical in building and maintaining a learning community, yet they are seldom taught thus seldom part of student or professor repertoire. Relationship and community building requires a wide range of content that is transdisciplinary, complex, probably developmental. In addition, our ways of relating are often a result of our life experiences. If teachers and students are involved in unhealthy relationships or learned

dysfunctional patterns of relating, then new patterns of relating or communicating may be more difficult to accept (Elias & Clabby, 1992).

Remind me of the Rewards, again

Consciously examining the entanglements leads professors to feel a sense of excitement about developing a progression of tools for implementing a wider repertoire of teaching modalities. Others may question the usefulness. Those who proceed with implementation will recognize additional factors that impact shifting teacher and student roles. The 'personality' of each class and group of students challenges the expertise of the teacher in reading and responding to that particular group (Sarason, 1982). Far from boring, teaching this way leads to self transcendence. Professors achieve some of the best change by personal reflection and intuitive moves accomplished by accident or trial and error. The Gestalt of each group, the mix of students and teacher, provides a different outcome in each setting, each course.

Community building is especially vital in this period of ready information. A growing percentage of students are adept at sweeping the Internet for facts. With knowledge so available, teachers recognize anew that disseminating information is not the critical mission. The challenge of teaching comes in helping to build people, practitioners of life and society, not in building a knowledge base. Amassing and organizing knowledge is one critical piece, yes, but far more important is facilitating the development of thinking minds (Schon, 1987) and caring hearts (Montouri & Conti 1993). We are emerging from a generation who can amass facts with fingertips with a clearer vision of the importance of moving beyond "knowing" to sharing and utilizing. We live in the midst of Bloom's (1968) higher order thinking message, and can recognize the importance of assisting students in self and community building (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Richards & Light, 1986). Job security to teach this? It is world security (Fried, 1994; Levine, 1994). Challenges on the horizon include utilizing a world based economy, building and living in a global community, understanding and valuing disparate viewpoints and integrating incongruous ideals. Expertise in communicating, negotiating, cooperating and synthesizing are emerging as crucial elements for maintaining equilibrium in the impending world reality (Covey, 1991; Peters, 1992).

Finally, for many of us, professing is an act of devotion. Our energy for teaching comes from a sense of dedication to transmit, transform and extend knowledge and understanding. We wish to intellectually engage students and encourage them to be critical and creative thinkers. We hope to promote scholars who are life long

learners (Boyer, 1990). As scholars, we see beyond the dissemination of ideas to active engagement in moving beyond professing. We know from sharing the platform with graduate students, that actively engaging students in teaching promotes depth and commitment to scholarship. This model allows us to share that richness with a much larger group of students. Potentially, that will also transfer to the quality of thinking, depth of preparation and number of students sustaining interest for pursuit of higher level studies.

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